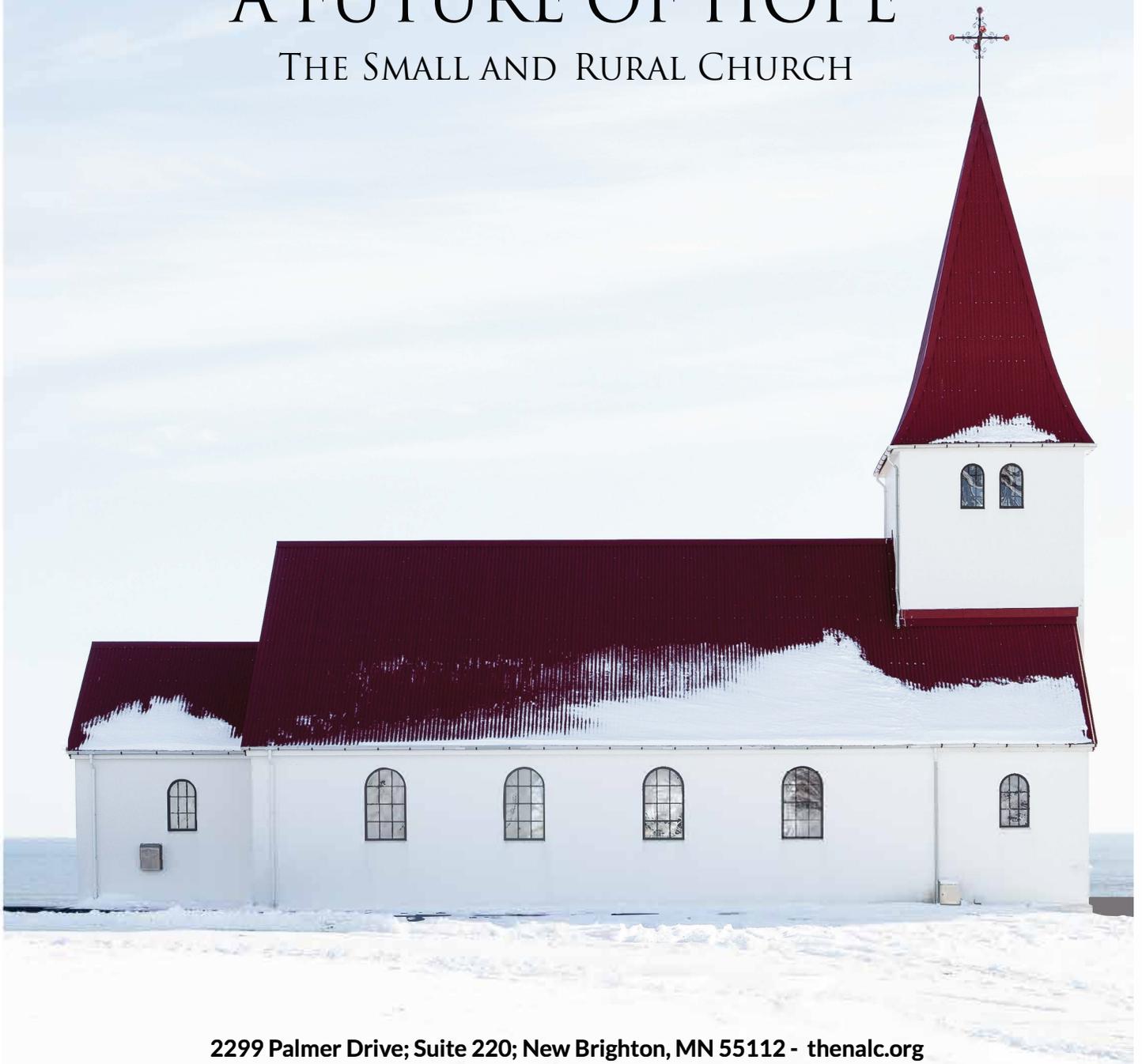


# A FUTURE OF HOPE

## THE SMALL AND RURAL CHURCH



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# INTRODUCTION

There is a prevailing attitude in some quarters that if a church doesn't worship many people, receive an adequate sum of offerings, or isn't saturated with daily programming, then it is not viable as a center for mission.

Some believe that if a congregation is aging and struggling to do ministry in communities which are declining, then it has little hope for the future. Sadly, these thoughts and opinions are based on worldly standards rather than what the Holy Spirit is doing. The small and rural church is the backbone of the Christian community in the United States. Whether these congregations are found in tiny towns, the middle of farmland, residential enclaves in suburbia or nestled within bustling cities, groups of dedicated individuals gather in mission, centered in Word and Sacrament, seeking ways to build relationships and reach out to their neighbors.

It would be too simplistic to look back at the past, lamenting and being discouraged at the differences in our congregations today. Dwelling on what was is neither healthy nor productive. We have a God who wants to equip and empower us to make Jesus known now and in the future. **Small is not bad!** As seen through the words of the prophet in **Micah 5:2**, the smallness of Bethlehem didn't seem to bother the Lord.

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be  
among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for  
me one who is to be ruler of Israel, whose coming forth is  
from of old, from ancient days.**

Instead of allowing negativity and pessimism to consume the congregation and cause it to think it is not good enough, a new way of thinking must emerge and take hold. The small and rural church is viable and vital in making disciples for Jesus Christ. The goal of this study is to offer encouragement to these congregations, helping them to realize that they are a fundamental and foundational part of today's larger Church community. These congregations do have the ability to form relationships, serve and empower/equip individuals to do ministry in their daily lives.

When it comes to the small and rural church, these congregations today represent a “future of hope.” The Holy Spirit can work within any size group for the saving, grace-filled message Christ proclaimed. As it is written in **Matthew 18:20**,

**“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”**

Jesus is with the small and rural church. Therefore, it can flourish and touch lives.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you see your church right now? Is it active or stagnant?  
Is it reaching out, or inwardly closed?
2. Are many participating, or is ministry only done by a few? How is it reaching out to your local area? Would you invite someone to worship with you? Why or why not?
3. Maybe your church has been around for a long time. How is Jesus going to keep it going and focused on the future?

# THE STRUGGLE

No one will deny that the small and rural church has had, and continues to have, its difficulties.

Outside of aging, depleting worship attendance, the lack of children and the loss of jobs in the community, what do you believe are the five most significant struggles that your congregation is presently facing. Please discuss.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.



Certainly, the early church had a hard time dealing with: persecution, false teachings (heresies), sexual immorality, circumcision, meat dedicated to idols and disunity among the believers. But, even as these issues threatened to derail the church, the Holy Spirit was present strengthening/growing the believers and moving the mission forward for the sake of the Gospel.

Please read and discuss the following biblical texts.

- 1 Corinthians 13:10
- Ephesians 2:19-22
- Ephesians 4:14-16

Yes, we must confront the struggles, as they can become an impediment to ministry and spiritual growth. But, even in these difficulties, there are great things happening in our congregations. What are the five best ministry opportunities in your local church, especially focused on reaching out to the community?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

**How do you think the known challenges that affect your small and rural congregation can be used to help move forward in its witness to Christ?**

# DISCIPLESHIP

The small church has wonderful opportunities for growth, mission and outreach, and it all begins with discipleship. Remember that a disciple is a pupil, learning from the Master. Please read and discuss the following biblical texts.

- **Matthew 28:18-20**
- **John 8:31-32**
- **II Timothy 3:16-17**
- **Philippians 4:6**
- **I John 5:14-15**
- **Matthew 6:5-15**
- **Psalm 100**
- **Hebrews 10:19-25**
- **I Peter 4:8-11**
- **Matthew 6:21**
- **II Corinthians 8:1-7**
- **II Corinthians 9:6-7**

Discipleship is the “lifeblood” in our growing faith relationship with Jesus Christ. Through engagement with God’s Word, prayer, worship, witness, service and stewardship, Jesus and His saving grace becomes more real for us, as we experience the call to make disciples of others.

**Discussion Questions:**

What kinds of things is your congregation doing to help people grow in their discipleship? Small groups? Bible studies? Discipleship groups? Please explain.

Is there anything that your church needs to implement to enhance people’s faith journeys?

How are you helping people to grow in prayer? Prayer groups? Prayer chain? Healing prayer? Prayer retreats? Prayer vigils? What is working for you?

# RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are extremely important to the small and rural church. Personally knowing one another, relating to friends/neighbors, reaching out and participating in the local community is essential for outreach and witness.

When we look at relationships there are three distinct connections which are vital for the ministry of the local congregation.

- 1. Relationship with Jesus.**
- 2. Relationships with each other.**
- 3. Relationship with the community.**

Please read and discuss the following biblical texts.

## **Relationship with Jesus:**

- **Ephesians 2:8-10**
- **II Corinthians 5:17-18**
- **Romans 5:6-8**
- **John 15:1-17**

**Relationships with Each Other:**

- Exodus 20:12-17
- John 13:34-35
- Ephesians 4:25-31
- I Peter 4:7-10

**Relationship with the Community:**

- Philippians 2:14-16
- Luke 10:30-37
- Luke 15:1-7
- Colossians 4:5-6

How is your church doing in these relationship areas? Do any of these connections need to be improved upon? Please explain.

# EVANGELISM: CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Whether a church is large or small, there is always an occasion to share the “Good News” of Jesus Christ with friends, relatives, associates and neighbors. This does not mean shoving Christ down someone’s throat or using the Word of God as a club. We share Jesus in our service. We share Jesus in our relationships. We share Jesus in our faith stories. We share Jesus both directly and indirectly.

In smaller communities where most people know one another it may be harder to share Christ in a direct manner. But, in our daily examples of witnessing to the Lord, it is always possible and essential. Please read the following biblical texts and discuss.

- **Acts 1:8**
- **Matthew 9:35-38**
- **I Peter 3:13-17**
- **Romans 10:14-17**
- **Colossians 4:5-6**
- **Mark 10:29-30**
- **Luke 12:8-12**

What are some ways that your congregation is evangelizing in the community?  
How are you training people to share their faith in Jesus?

What are some of the needs in your community? How can you begin to respond?



## THE GIFT OF AGING

In a majority of our small and rural churches there is an elephant in the room that must be recognized and discussed. Aging. Churches are now predominantly filled with gray hair rather than the shouts of children. Some will make the argument that an aging church is a dying church. But do we have to receive this judgment? Can't we look at aging differently in Christ's Church? You bet we can! In the next several years, millions of people will be getting older. Just imagine how many mature adults could hear the message of Jesus. Just imagine how many seniors could grow in their discipleship. Just imagine how many elders could be touched by the Word of God.

Aging is not a death wish for the church, but a glaring opportunity to renew, revive and rekindle the Body. God promises to take care of the aged and use them to make His name known to the generations to come.

Please read and discuss the following biblical texts.

- **Isaiah 46:3-4**
- **Psalm 71:17-18**
- **Psalm 92:12-15**
- **Proverbs 17:6**
- **Luke 2:22-38**
- **I Timothy 1:5**
- **Titus 2:1-6**

What kinds of intentional ministries is your church doing with older adults? How are you helping seniors to grow in their discipleship?

What methods are you using to evangelize to mature adults in the community?

Grandparents can play a key role in sharing the faith with their grandchildren. How is your church promoting ministry with grandparents? How are you helping grandparents to make Jesus known to their families?

# ATTITUDE

It would be logical for the small and rural congregation to struggle with its identity, wouldn't it? If these parishes only compare themselves to seemingly larger, programmatic, outreach-oriented churches, it's probable that the negativity, poor image and perceived lack of effectiveness will slowly infiltrate into the congregation's DNA.

Have you ever heard the old saying, "Things aren't always what they seem?" While a larger church may appear to be thriving on the outside, it doesn't mean that they are healthy on the inside. This can go for any size church. It is vital that the small and rural congregation stop basing its specific situation on other church examples, and start accepting who they are, and what they can be. Size doesn't matter. It's about vision, passion and following God's plan. The small and rural congregation is no one's "black sheep." It has the privilege to bloom and grow where it's been planted, slowly and methodically making Christ known for years to come. And it all begins with attitude. Please read and discuss the following texts.

- **Matthew 6:33**
- **Romans 12:2**
- **Philippians 2:3-5**
- **Philippians 2:14-15**
- **Philippians 4:13**

# CONCLUDING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What excites you about the future of this congregation?

What are some goals that you would like to set forth and accomplish?

How can the people of this church be encouraged about their ministries in Jesus Christ?

How do you see your church making an impact within the local community? What will it take to make that happen?

*For additional resources, information or to connect with Pastor Brad Hales, author of this Bible study,  
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